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ABSTRACT

Children of migrant workers, whose employment necessarily entails travel and work during parts of the school year, suffer academically from their truncated schooling and a different cultural background from both those who teach them and those who attend school with them. To counter these disadvantages, the creation of an awareness group time--half an hour each day--provides all children within the class with a chance to speak freely and listen to others on matters of personal concern and to establish closer relationships among themselves. Also benefiting from these discussions, the teacher must establish a warm, non-critical atmosphere which inspires the children's trust, draws out shy children, and gently but firmly deals with aggressive children. From discussions, drawings, puppet plays, and role-playing within these awareness groups, the migrant child may become more aware of his feelings and what triggers them, of his potential capabilities, and of the interpersonal consequences of his behavior. (JM)

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AWARENESS GROUPS FOR MIGRANT CHILDREN

A paper delivered at the 1974 Convention
of the Central States Speech Association by

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Every spring thousands of migrant workers drive north from Texas to work the harvests throughout the Mid-West, from Oklahoma up through Wisconsin. Many travel as families. To do so, children must be taken out of school before the end of the spring semester, usually to return late in the fall, thus, drastically foreshortening their academic year.

Approximately 75% of the migrant population is Chicano, a people whose first language is Spanish, whose culture is heavily influenced by its Mexican roots. Their children are taught predominantly by middle-class Anglos, usually fluent only in English and sparcely familiar with Chicano life.

The ultimate consequences of truncated schooling and instructional mismatching are disastrous. By the end of first grade more than 80% of these children are behind in reading, they go on to complete five years less schooling than the national average, and most assume the work role of their parents without having had the opportunity to choose between it and other vocations.

Their teachers, perhaps anticipating their future, may actually help to fulfill this prophesy. The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights recently undertook a major study of classroom behavior comparing teacher interaction

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with Mexican American and Anglo students. They found that teachers praise, question, call upon Mexican-American students considerably less often than they do Anglo students, and they strongly recommended teacher training to offset this imbalance.[1]

The communication behavior of teachers, therefore, can be a contributing factor to the high proportion of educational failure in this group. Thankfully, the problem no longer is ignored. One example of recent concern with it involved me. In 1972 I was asked to conduct a workshop for about 150 teachers and aides who were to work in 13 summer elementary school programs for nearly 2,000 migrant children across the state of Kansas. The focus was to be on classroom human relations, and three days were allotted for the training. This article is a report of the reasoning which shaped that workshop, its content, and its effect.

II

My first task was to identify quickly teachable classroom communication practices that would involve and affect migrant children positively and significantly. I found my direction in the book that most vividly portrays the perspective of the migrant child, Uprooted Children by Robert Coles. Dr. Coles, a psychiatrist, lived for seven years with migrant families. Through countless experiences and dialogues he came to empathize deeply with their way of living. At one point he reports asking a boy about school, about the bitter and the happy experiences he had had there.

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[1] U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, Teachers and Students: Differences in Teacher Interaction With Mexican-American and Anglo Students (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1973), p. iii.

What that boy shared regarding one outstanding teacher gave me the direction for the human relations program I would propose:

> To me a good school is one where the teacher is friendly, and she wants to be on your side, and she'll ask you to tell the other kids some of the things you can do, and all you've done--you know, about the crops, and like that. There was one teacher like that, and I think it was up North, in New York it was. She said that so long as we were there in the class she was going to ask everyone to join us, that's what she said, and we could teach the other kids what we know and they could do the same with us. She showed the class where we travelled, on the map, and I told my daddy that I never before knew how far we went each year, and he said he couldn't understand why I didn't know, because I did the travelling all right, with him, and so I should know. But when you look on the map and hear the other kids say they've never been that far, and they wish someday they could, then you think you've done something good, too, and they'll tell you in the recess that they've only seen where they live and we've been all over.[2]

This incident suggested to me that a portion of every school day be taken to provide a comparable experience, one that would brighten the child's view of his family, his ethnic group, and, most importantly, of himself.

The procedure I advocated called for each classroom teacher and her aide to sit in a circle conversing with their students for about half-an-hour every school day. The topic for that discussion would focus on an aspect of the children's lives, on their personal experiences described as they see them. It would be a topic about which every child would have a response to contribute, a discussion in which the migrant child could actively participate, perhaps have even an extra measure of input. This would not be a time for science, history, or literature to be discussed. Instead, the focus would be on the world as experienced by the children.

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[2]Robert Coles, Uprooted Children: The Early Life of Migrant Farm Workers (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), pp. 43-4.

In other words, instead of discussing the geography of America, migrant children might talk about "How I help my family get ready to move," "Places I have enjoyed when traveling," or "How I start making friends in a new place." Each of these topics draws upon the personal, phenomenological world of the children, assists them in articulating their feelings, and offers them a chance to hear how others experience common situations. Geography helps one gain a clearer view of how the external environment is arranged. These groups, which I called "awareness groups," help one to see himself and his peers more clearly. When these issues are discussed there are no right or wrong answers. Every contribution to the exchange is heard and accepted as a picture of the world as the child sees it.

The procedure to be used was adopted from the "magic circle" format developed by Bessell and Palomares.[3] Children are gathered into a circle, at the same time every day, often on the floor, and reminded that this is a time for sharing, for learning about each other, not about a particular school subject. The topic is introduced, perhaps with an illustrative example, and a warm invitation is extended to encourage a volunteer to begin sharing. He is given clear indication that his message has been heard as intended. Often a question or an attempt at paraphrasing is needed for clarification. Once he has clearly shared and completed his response to the day's topic, another child takes his turn to contribute. Intersperced throughout their comments are listening checks ("Who was listening and can tell me what Carlos said?" "How is that different from what Maria said?") to assure the speakers that they have been heard accurately, to keep passive

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[3]Harold Bessell and Vvaldo Palomares, Methods in Human Development: Theory Manual (San Diego, California: Human Development Training Institute, 1970).

group members actively involved, and to stress the completion of the communication process. After everyone who wished to has shared his response to the topic, including the adult(s) in the group, the comments made are summarized by the leader or a particularly attentive group member.

This procedure, which usually lasts about 20 to 30 minutes, can have a significant impact when carried out on a regular daily basis. The 1972 summer Migrant Education Program in Kansas lasted only six weeks. 221 of the elementary school children participating were given the Primary Self-Concept Scale before and after the six-week session. They showed mean gains on all but one of the factors measured. These included:

1. Their assessment of themselves in sharing and cooperating with their peers.
2. Their assessment of themselves as students, and their like for school
3. Their assessment of themselves as helpers.
4. Their perception of their physical self.
5. Their perception of their acceptance by adult figures (parents, teachers).
6. Their perception of themselves emotionally. (They had previously viewed themselves as sad, angry children, but now viewed themselves as happier.)
7. Their view of their performance of task-oriented pursuits.[4]

The only factor on which no gain appeared was their view of their acceptance by fellow students. Since all were children of migrant workers, who generally live closely together in camps while working the Kansas crop, this factor was expected to begin and to remain high at the two testing points, and it was.

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[4]Kenneth A. Martinez, Inservice Program for Personnel Working in Title I (Migrant) ESEA Programs in Kansas During Summer of 1972: Final Report (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Community Development Center, 1972), p. 9.

Why did such a simple, brief discussion period have a significant impact on children's attitudes? There are many aspects of the process which might account for the results achieved. Perhaps it was the opportunity for children to speak freely and to hear others on matters of deepest personal concern. The benefits of frankly sharing one's thoughts and feelings with compassionate listeners cannot be overestimated. Such dialogue is common to the process of every psychotherapeutic system.

The closer, truer friendships among students, and with the teacher, that developed from daily conversations of this sort were especially meaningful to migrant children. Moving several times each year cuts off the possibility of getting beyond the superficialities of a beginning friendship. An awareness group discussion assists the migrant child in learning how to articulate his most personal feeling-level reactions, an aspect of his language development usually neglected since he is denied the long-term relationships that bring it out in most children. Common ground is thus built quickly among students. Migrants no longer feel themselves a breed apart, living a life unrelated to those they pass on the highways. When they hear how the teacher and their fellow students all experience similar feelings, their self-respect and sense of oneness with others increase.

The middle-class teacher, too, can learn through these discussions what occurs in her students' outside lives and what their individual interests and needs are. Concurrently, the students come to see their teacher as human, as a person who has concerns and feelings of her own, who can perhaps be as much a friend and helper as a disciplinarian or a dispenser of lessons and tests. This is especially crucial for the slow or under-achieving child. In the regular routine of the school day, he knows he is behind. In an awareness group his contribution is as valued as anyone else's,

perhaps even a bit more. His attitude toward school and his role in it can become substantially more positive from this small segment of the day when he succeeds by just being himself.

III

The main thrust of what this procedure accomplishes can be shaped by the topics chosen for discussion. The direction can be determined by the children's awareness needs or by the major factors in their environment or communication style.

Three major awareness areas were identified: awareness of self, awareness of competency, and awareness of human relations.

Awareness of self topics aid a child to be more aware of his feelings and of what triggers them. When children seem driven by strong, one-sided feelings, whose sources are unclear to them, awareness of self topics are most appropriate. For example, a child may be especially hostile or withdrawn in school, but when asked "Why?" can offer only, "I don't know," or "It's boring." This child would benefit from expressing himself and hearing other children respond to topics such as, "A time in school when I felt afraid I would fail," or "A time when the teacher hurt my feelings," or "A time when I felt embarrassed in school." These discussions would clarify for him and the teacher some of the sources of his negative attitude. They also would help him to realize that he isn't alone in these feelings, that all his peers have faced such awkward moments. In addition, the other side of the feeling spectrum would be brought out through discussion of topics such as: "A day that I really enjoyed school," "A time that a teacher made me feel good," "A school project or assignment that I did well."

As a result, the student would become more aware that he and his peers have also had many positive associations with school. Through a regular series of such discussions, students come to clarify and expand their self-awareness. No longer does each believe his reactions are unique, nor are they over-simplified or vague. Instead, they can identify within themselves many kinds of specific reactions, put them into words, recognize the causes of those reactions, and perceive comparable experiences in their contemporaries.

When students in a class seem to devalue their own ability, aspirations, or personal worth, awareness of competence topics are most appropriate. These remind a student that he has many potential capabilities that can be tapped. Minority and migrant children often get off to a bad start in school and henceforth lose faith in their ability to achieve successfully. They can benefit from discussions that highlight their already existing strengths. Thus, topics such as, "Work I can do in the fields," "What I do to help take care of children younger than me," "Foods I can prepare," etc., allow them to focus upon abilities they have already actualized, achievements they have already made. These strengthen their self-concept. Topics such as, "Something I would like to learn how to do," "A job I would like to have some day," "Something my father or mother can do that I can't," etc., help them to clarify their aspirations for the future. In addition, topics related to their ethnic heritage, e.g. "Mexican foods I enjoy," "Holidays we celebrate," "Phrases I know in Spanish and in English," etc., help to counteract the humiliations that accompany being a minority member in an Anglo-oriented society. Again, it is the child's response to the topics, the teacher's unconditional acceptance of all he says, and hearing his peers' points of view that combine to produce the benefits of awareness group discussions.

The third cluster of goals for these discussions fit under the rubric of Awareness of Human Relations. When children in a classroom seem unaware of the effect of their behavior on others, when individuals are scapegoated or drawn into cliques under group pressure, when individuals seek special attention or privileges, discussions in this area are warrented. Consequently, through topics such as, "A time I got into trouble," "A time when I felt left out of a group," "Something I did that made someone else feel good," etc., children get a clearer picture of the interpersonal consequences of their behavior. They become better able to predict how others will respond to them. They gain greater control over their social behavior as cause and effect patterns emerge with ever greater clarity.

Environmental factors are revealed in the children's life styles. Migrant children, for example, travel more than others, are closer to agricultural processes, and help out at home in more ways than most children. Chicano children have family relationships, foods, holidays, church activities, stories, songs, etc., that have Mexican roots. These special features of their lives can be reflected in the topics around which awareness groups are built.

In addition, some children are more fluent with particular modes of communication. Migrant children are not accustomed to talking at length about themselves. Robert Coles found that they will respond more readily when asked first to draw a picture about an experience they have had and then are questioned patiently about their reactions to the scene depicted.[5]

Through discussion primarily, but through drawings, puppets, role-playing, and other means as well, children can be encouraged to share with each other their perceptions

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[5]Coles, p. 75-6.

and feelings about their everyday lives. This exchange can enrich their awareness of themselves, their abilities, and their interactions with others--all extremely worthwhile, but often neglected aspects of children's growth toward maturity.

IV

It may appear from this brief summary of what awareness groups for migrant children entail that this procedure is simply and easily employed. Indeed, its essential structure is readily apparent and easily grasped. However, it is not as easy to put into practice effectively as it may seem. A variety of skills are required for successful implementation. One is the ability to inspire sufficient trust in children so that they will openly express themselves. This requires developing an atmosphere of warmth or positive regard, genuine attentive listening, communicating empathic understanding instead of judgmental evaluation, asking gently probing open-ended questions, being aware of who is ready to speak and who needs more time to gather his thoughts and courage, knowing how to recognize and explore the feelings behind each child's comments, consistent courtesy and deep interest in children. Selecting and then phrasing an inviting introduction to an appropriate topic is crucial, as is keeping the discussion on a profitable track, and summarizing it at its close. Dealing with difficult participants, such as the habitually quiet, reticent child, the aggressive, dominant child, and the overly conforming, teacher-pleasing child also requires skills that tax the abilities of a teacher.

It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss each of these factors in depth. I have written, however, a manual which does treat each at length

and in detail. It is in the form of a ten-lesson independent study course which may be read only or completed for academic credit.[6] It presents the theory and techniques of the awareness group procedure introduced here, a methodology which measurably enriched the school experience of migrant children. (It also has been applied with children of many other social groups.) All it requires is a teacher who believes that the inner, personal world of the child is as significant to his growth as are the other subjects in the curriculum, who is willing to master the skills needed to make this procedure effective, and who is willing to allocate half-an-hour of the school day to its use.

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[6]Paul Friedman, Developing Children's Awareness Through Communication (Lawrence, Kansas: Extramural Independent Study Center, 1973).